DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 647 CS 013 860

TITLE	The Role of Phonics in Reading Instruction: A Position Statement of the International Reading Association.
INSTITUTION	International Reading Association, Newark, DE.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	10p.
AVAILABLE FROM	International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, P.O. Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139 ($5 per 10 copies plus $3 shipping/handling, or $0.30 each for 100 or more copies plus $3 shipping/handling). Tel: 800-336-7323 (Toll Free); Web site: http://www.reading.org.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Beginning Reading; *Instructional Effectiveness; *Phonics; Primary Education; *Reading Instruction; Reading Programs; Teacher Behavior

ABSTRACT

Noting that the role of phonics in reading and writing has become as much a political issue as it has an educational one, this pamphlet offers a position statement regarding the role of phonics in a total reading program. It begins with three assertions regarding phonics and the teaching of reading: (1) the teaching of phonics is an important aspect of beginning reading instruction; (2) classroom teachers in the primary grades do value and do teach phonics as part of their reading programs; and (3) phonics instruction, to be effective in promoting independence in reading, must be embedded in the context of a total reading/language arts program. The pamphlet concludes with an outline for a professional stance towards phonics. (RS)

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1018
97-16 PUB 3/97 REV 9/97

The Role of PHONICS in Reading Instruction

A Position Statement of the International Reading Association

1. The teaching of phonics is an important aspect of beginning reading instruction.

This assertion represents a longstanding and widely shared view within the reading education community. The following statements from leaders in the field reveal the strength and history of this understanding.

"When the child has reached the maturity level at which he can make the best use of formal instruction in phonics, certainly no time should be lost in launching an extensive and carefully organized program to promote the wide and independent use of phonics in attacking new words, regardless of the grade or the time in the school year when this occurs."

Nila Banton Smith
IRA Founding Member

"Phonics instruction serves one purpose: to help readers figure out as quickly as possible the pronunciation of unknown words."

Dolores Durkin
Reading Hall of Fame Member

"Perhaps the most widely respected value of letter-sound instruction is that it provides students with a means of deciphering written words that are visually unfamiliar."

Marilyn Jager Adams
Author, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*

"Phonics is a tool needed by all readers and writers of alphabetically written languages such as English. While I am not a proponent of isolated drill, overreliance on worksheets, or rote memorization of phonic rules, I support the teaching of phonics that children actually need and use to identify words quickly and accurately. These strategies need to be taught systematically in well-planned lessons."

Richard T. Vacca
IRA President, 1996–1997

"Early, systematic, explicit phonics instruction is an essential part, but only part, of a balanced, comprehensive reading program. Phonics and other word-identification skills are tools that children need to read for information, for enjoyment, and for developing insights. The intensity and form of phonics instruction must be adjusted to the individual needs of children by a well-prepared teacher."

John J. Pikulski
IRA President, 1997–1998

We do not wish to suggest through these quotations that there is perfect harmony within the field regarding how phonics should be taught in a total reading program, rather that there is nearly unanimous regard for its importance.

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2. Classroom teachers in the primary grades do value and do teach phonics as part of their reading programs.

A recent national study (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy, 1996) of reading instruction in American public schools found that 98% of primary-grade teachers regard phonics instruction as a very important part of their reading program. Further, the study found that primary-grade teachers engage their students in phonics lessons on a regular basis as part of instruction in reading and writing.

Although there are many different types of or approaches to phonics instruction (e.g., intensive, explicit, synthetic, analytic, embedded), all phonics instruction focuses the learner's attention on the relationships between sounds and symbols as an important strategy for word recognition. Teaching phonics, like all teaching, involves making decisions about what is best for children. Rather than engage in debates about whether phonics should or should not be taught, effective teachers of reading and writing ask when, how, how much, and under what circumstances phonics should be taught. Programs that constrain teachers from using their professional judgment in making instructional decisions about what is best in phonics instruction for students simply get in the way of good teaching practices.

3. Phonics instruction, to be effective in promoting independence in reading, must be embedded in the context of a total reading/language arts program.

Reading is the complex process of understanding written texts. Children learn to read by using many sources of information such as their experiences, illustrations and print on the page, and knowledge of language—including their knowledge of sound-symbol correspondences. When teachers share interesting and informative books, nursery rhymes, songs, and poems with predictable language patterns, children develop and refine their use of these various information sources. Children become aware of and understand how print on a page relates to meaning. When children engage with texts themselves, as readers or writers, they begin to orchestrate this knowledge of how written language works to achieve success. It is within these kinds of contexts of language use that direct instruction in phonics takes on meaning for the learner. When phonics instruction is linked to children's genuine efforts to read and write, they are motivated to learn. When phonics instruction is linked to children's reading and writing, they are more likely to become strategic and independent in their use of phonics than when phonics instruction is drilled and practiced in isolation. Phonics knowledge is critical but not sufficient to support growing independence in reading.

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The best approaches for how to teach children to read and write have been debated throughout much of the 20th century. Today, the role of phonics in reading and writing has become as much a political issue as it has an educational one. Teachers and schools have become the focus of unprecedented public scrutiny as the controversy over phonics is played out in the media, state legislatures, school districts, and the home. In response to the many requests that have been received, the International Reading Association offers the following position statement regarding the role of phonics in a total reading program.

We begin with three assertions regarding phonics and the teaching of reading. We conclude with an expression of concerns for the current state of affairs and a call for professionalism.

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